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THE BIBLE AND ETHICAL CODES

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What a man thinks of his Bible from the viewpoint of ethical codes must largely depend upon the theory he holds as to the main purpose of God in blessing the world with the book. If he believes that God's chief intention in the matter was to bestow upon humanity, once and for all, a complete set of rules for our guidance in every particular of every relationship of our increasingly complex lives, he will consult the book continually with the expectation of finding within it the precise directions he needs in connection with each step that he takes. If, on the other hand, he looks upon his Bible as the principal vehicle of that revelation of himself to men, as Creator, Upholder, Moral Governor, and Savior, which God saw was absolutely essential to their highest development and well-being; and as containing only such moral precepts as from time to time represented the growing needs of the people, through whose seers this revelation was given; he will, consciously or unconsciously, do these two things in his own interests: First, he will study the book principally to learn all it can tell him about God, particularly as he stands revealed in the life and teaching of his Son, Jesus Christ. And secondly, he will gather from the book all he can find there of a nature suitable for his guidance in the affairs of his twentieth-century life; and when he sees it failing him at some scores of points, he will look into the laws of his own church and country, in the full belief that the same God who guided the Israelite is guiding individuals and peoples still, by giving them new laws suitable to their various additional requirements.

Few, if any, today actually hold any other position toward the Bible than the second of those which I have just described. The debates which have arisen over the question of the Bible and ethical codes have grown out of the fact that some men still think that they regard the first position I have set forth as the correct one, though they do not really so regard it at all.

First of all, then, let me say that if we could find a man who really holds that the Bible contains this complete and perfect code, we should have in our presence an individual capable of believing that all necessary original thinking on questions of moral conduct was done by a few members of one small family of mankind, before the end of the second century A.D. The Bible is a product of the Israelitish mind as divinely enlightened. This process of divine illumination on the foregoing theory came to an end with the completion of the New Testament. This means that from that date to the end of human history, there could exist no need for, and therefore no experience of, such divine illumination as was imparted to and enjoyed by the seers of the Old and New Testaments. The question does not lie here between the illumination experienced by Jesus and that enjoyed by the church from the day of Pentecost onward, but between the illumination bestowed upon the church from Pentecost to the end of the apostolic period, and that experienced by the same church from the end of the apostolic period to the close of the Christian era. For Jesus, according to John, distinctly informed him and his fellow-apostles that he had not taught them everything, but that they would themselves enjoy illumination by the same Spirit that had made him the teacher they had found him to be. By that Spirit, and not by himself, they would be guided into all they needed to know. Is there anyone who really believes that the church during this brief period actually faced and permanently settled every question with a moral aspect that would become a practical one before the end?

When one speaks of questions with a moral aspect he opens up a large field. The world of thought and action was once divided by Christian thinkers into two departments, which were designated as sacred and secular. This is no longer done with any definiteness, for a certain divine illumination has made it clear that thought and action along the "secular" lines demand the guidance of conscience and the approval of God, and must, therefore, be regarded as also distinctly "sacred." God is king of the whole life, or he is no king at all.

In morals the personal equation is one of no small dimensions. It can be seen from the standpoint of the choice of one's life-work, and it is very obtrusive sometimes in connection with questions of foods and recreations. It is generally recognized, for instance, that some

men must be preachers of the gospel, or lead a life of continuous rebellion against God. It is also believed that some of these preachers must go to foreign lands with their message, or live under the same condemnation. It is held, too, that, considered as a class, each of these men knows for himself, apart from and often against the opinion and wish of his fellow-men, that he is "called" to this service. Carey is a leading example. But whence came Carey's call? From what ethical code? "Quench not the Spirit" would guide him after the call reached him. But no word of the New Testament laid upon William Carey missionary service as his life-work. God spoke to him directly, as truly as he did to the apostle Paul, or any ancient prophet.

I shall not tarry over the fact that in matters of foods and recreations the duty of abstinence is often determined by purely personal considerations, which no ethical code could by any possibility deal with in a satisfactory way. "Thou shalt" reaches one man and "Thou shalt not" another in connection with the same act. It is a matter of tradition, if not of history, that John Wesley quit the pursuit of mathematics to avoid sinning against his own soul. The Spirit of God, working through intellect and conscience, and often mysteriously instructing men, still illuminates and guides the individual. There can, in the very nature of things, be no complete ethical code for the government of any individual life. And God's plan for governing the race is, to an extent not generally recognized, that of dealing with its members individually and directly. Ethical codes, therefore, do not deal with the individual as an individual, so much as they meet him as a member of the social organism.

Is, then, the ethical code of the Bible in all its particulars fitted to govern men of every clime and age to the end of human history? And is it complete? In other words, does it provide for every phase of human activity that has called, or will call, for righteous legislative control?

The first fact calling for our attention here is that, when one is asked for the code we are now to discuss definitely, he can only reply that its various items may be found scattered through the various documents of which the Bible is composed, and that they cannot be codified, or set forth as a distinct body of laws, without the expenditure of much labor. The Bible is not an ethical code. It is something higher. It contains our most glorious revelation of God. Associated

with that in the volume, however, are many ethical precepts. But any man who attempts the task of codifying these will find himself compelled to do much sifting, for Christ and his apostles dealt rather freely with at least some portions of the Mosaic legislation. One of the latter, Paul, wrote of Christ that he "broke down the barrier that separated Jew and Gentile and in his human nature put an end to the cause of enmity between them—the Law with its injunctions and ordinances" (Eph. 2:15). To this he adds in another place, "He cancelled the bond which was against us—the bond which consisted of ordinances—and which was directly hostile to us. He has taken it out of the way by nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14).

There has been much debate as to how far Paul really went in these statements and others which might be cited. But it can scarcely be doubted that he regarded his Lord as having, by his earthly life and his law of love, not only set aside the elaborate ritual of Mosaism, but superseded the whole moral code also, through the substitution for it of the single inclusive principle of love. Consequently we find that his own chief aim was neither to master the ethical code of the past, nor to produce a perfect one for the guidance of himself and his fellow-believers, but to build up both himself and them in the knowledge of Christ. He saw that "Christ has brought Law to an end, so that righteousness may be obtained by every one who believes in him" (Rom. 10:4), and was a legalist no longer. He turned from the Law to the Life, to find a wealth both of information and of motive touching righteousness to which he would otherwise have been a stranger. The least we can say is that the ethical code in which he had been reared became to Paul a poor, dwarfed thing, big enough still to awe the man who loved transgression, but too unenlightened and feeble to help greatly the Christian believer in his pursuit of the holiness of his Master (I Tim. 1:9).

So the ethical code of the Old Testament met with disparagement at the hands of the most intellectual and voluminous of the New Testament writers. We cannot present the whole truth, however, without stating besides, that he disparaged it only when he compared it with the one positively and resplendently perfect human life. Considered in itself, he both valued and used it. His letters contain many ethical precepts, original and quoted. He knew that the church

needed them. He even accepted for his Gentile converts the regulations passed by the Jerusalem council for their guidance, though soon afterward he assured at least one of his churches that the man who ignored them with a free conscience in a certain particular showed a more vigorous and intelligent faith than they did who obeyed at this point (I Cor. 8:6-8).

I should now attempt to define the term ethical code, for it is probably at this point the chief difficulty has arisen. An ethical code is a body of precepts or laws touching conduct, of such a sort that they make an appeal to the conscience. Every law which makes this appeal belongs to the ethical code of the man who receives it. The appeal arises from the recognized righteousness which the law represents. The law may deal with any phase of human life whatever—religious, political, social, sanitary, or sexual. All law that through its apparent rightness appeals to the conscience, is ethical. All legal codes are ethical codes so far forth as they represent righteousness. To hold any other ground is to introduce confusion into both thought and life. Sanitary laws, for instance, are as sacred, though not as fundamental, as religious laws. Man's original and supreme relationship is Godward, and has to do with himself as distinguished from the material body, which he now inhabits and uses as his instrument for the accomplishment of his work in this world of matter. But he owes to his body, as Paul points out, the duty before God of nourishing, cherishing, guarding, and controlling it, not only as his own abode and instrument, but also as the very temple of God himself. Every human relationship is sacred and every duty moral. The Mosaic legislation in all its phases rests firmly upon the recognition of this fact. "Thus saith Jehovah" is its very keynote. It may be further said, too, that the voice of conscience and the recognized voice of God never conflict, because the former is so constituted that of necessity it makes itself an echo of the latter. It is only when the voice of God is not recognized by it, or has not yet reached it, that conscience directs into wrong paths. The voice of conscience, therefore, whatever else it may stand for, represents all that men have learned of the will of God, and when God speaks to men at all, he wakes up their consciences to speak for him. This is true for all the ages. To forget or ignore it is to enter into darkness

and pass on to disaster. Consequently all legislation which is recognized as righteous is looked upon as a gift of God to those who receive it, and for the time being at least men rest and rejoice in it.

God legislates for each time and people through the best combination of intellect and conscience then and there available. So all divine laws are at the same time human, though it is by no means true, on the other hand, that all human laws are also divine. Paul saw how other peoples besides his own were met in this matter, and provided with an illumination and guidance, which they often sadly misprized (Rom. 1:19-21; 2:14, 15). And one of the things we are coming to see clearly is that, as God dealt with these, so he dealt with Israel itself. "At many times and in many ways . . . by the Prophets and then by his Son" (Heb. 1:1) he brought their intellect and conscience to the recognition and assertion of higher and wider applications of the great principles which should govern all human activities. Progress is one law of our race that never grows old, never dies, and never ceases its operations. Many a legislative enactment dies through being superseded by a better, or because men march out of sight of it, leaving it behind to perish by the wayside. Progress is the fruit of God's working in men and men's working with God.

We may now ask how the ethical code of the Bible has fared in this respect. Has it had the experience of all other codes? Or does it stand forth today as the one magnificent exception? It is no part of my present undertaking to deal with this question exhaustively. All I need do is to cite one or two instances in which Israel's ethical code has been left behind. To begin with, then, our Lord dismissed the laws of Mosaism governing divorce and the requital of injuries, and also the one touching oaths. The sanitary and land laws of Israel, good as they were upon the whole, were left behind in a body by the followers of Christ, and that in spite of the fact that the first great leaders among them were Jews. Not even circumcision was allowed to survive. For a little while blood and the flesh of strangled animals, along with foods offered in sacrifice to idols, were forbidden to Christians; but almost at once, as I have already pointed out, Paul attacked the last-named regulation, and before long they all passed into oblivion, though the word in regard to them in the beginning was, "We have, therefore, decided, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,"

or "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us." At this point New Testament legislation has been dismissed along with that of the Old Testament. It is interesting to note, too, that instead of a "Thou shalt not enslave thy fellow-man" in the Decalogue, a law immediately follows that code permitting slavery under restrictions, that is to say, licensing it. Jesus never called up that license law for condemnation in the days of his flesh. His apostles, too, worked under it and other like legislation, with never a thought of its replacement by universal manumission, so far as we can tell. And no blame is due them because of this. License law is the beginning of prohibition, and those who censure it are simply out of patience with it, and perhaps not too soon, because it is not also the end. Yet after much painful toil Christendom climbed at length to the place where, so far as she herself is concerned, she left behind and below her, not only that law itself, but also all Paul's and Peter's inspired regulations for Christian slaves and their Christian masters. Every intelligent man knows these things, and knowing them believes, whether he realizes it or not, that some portions of the ethical code of the New Testament, as well as of the Old, were never adopted to be permanent.

I may now deal with the other question which I have undertaken to discuss. Is the ethical code of the Bible complete? In other words, does it provide for every phase of human activity that has called, or will call, for righteous legislative control?

In answering the first question I have also answered this, but not pointedly. I shall, therefore, proceed to deal with it specifically, with the aid of two illustrative instances. At the Anglican Synod in New Brunswick, recently, one of the rural deans took issue with the bishop on the question of the prohibition of the liquor traffic, grounding his argument upon the fact that this traffic comes in for no condemnation in the New Testament. We must confess that the rural dean was correct in this premise of his argument, and, as I have already pointed out, he might, with perfect truthfulness have added that the New Testament is equally deficient when we come to the institution of slavery. Nevertheless the modern command, "Thou shalt not enslave thy fellow," is felt today to be quite as sacred and binding as "Thou shalt not steal" or "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Besides this, all who are even fairly

read in the history of the struggle against slavery as an institution know how the Bible was used by the pro-slavery advocates in its favor. Their argument was that an institution which the Bible licensed could never be sanely regarded as marked out by God for destruction. The thing they did not know was that God did not complete his work as lawgiver in Bible times, but was working still through the intellects and consciences of his own, toward the annihilation of every institution and habit which is opposed to the highest welfare of our race. The rural dean in Fredericton was walking in a like darkness. And when one of the lay members of the Synod retorted that he did not care whether the Scott or Canada Temperance Act was in the Bible or not, he showed his faith in the fact that God is guiding our civilization today as really as he guided either Israel or the Christian church at the beginning. One need only add that when at length Christendom, as a whole, finds itself living under an ethical code, one of the most recent additions to which will be "Thou shalt sell no intoxicating beverage," all the truly enlightened will rejoice together that this command also came from God in the same general manner as those previously received by our race, and that others will follow as they are needed.

That the Bible contains all truth necessary for the salvation of the soul can be accepted gladly. It may also be affirmed with the utmost confidence, that it far surpasses all other ancient writings in the richness and variety of its ethical precepts, and that the New Testament is unique in the emphasis which it lays upon love as the great governing principle in all right conduct, and the very heart of every righteous disposition. This, however, is a very different thing from the claim that it contains an ethical code lofty enough and complete enough for the guidance in all things of the highest Christian civilization; for this claim virtually denies God's immutable law of progress, and a host of incontestable facts besides.

In regard to those fresh additions to our ethical code, which we need from time to time to guide us in connection with the various phases of our advancing civilization, and which represent a righteousness too large to have been set forth by any seer or apostle of the older time, we need entertain no worries. God himself takes care of these, and they always come to us when the time is ripe, like the morning

sun when he breaks through black thunder clouds to bless us with his beams. On the other hand, the problem how we may decide as to precisely what is permanent, and what merely temporary, in the ethical code of the book we love most, is not an easy one. Mistakes have been made and will continue to be made here. Still we have, as qualified to hearten us for this task, every divine fact which God has been able to place within the range of our limited vision. The Christ life looms larger as the years pass. Those perfect religious and moral principles, consisting of "the first of all the commandments . . . and the second," are still with us. On our lips is the word Immanuel, and, whether we realize it or not, God himself, with all his righteousness, his wisdom, and his love, enswathes and possesses us, as the very life of our life.

When modern science was born some men were pagan enough to think that it had proved that, after his work of creation, God either emptied himself out of the physical universe, to give free play to a certain set of physical laws, or stayed on only to play the poor part of an observer. Theologians helped to overthrow that notion, but some of the theologians themselves still cling to an old notion of their own that, after God had got himself seers and lawgivers from among a small, but wonderful family of Asiatics, that was, through the longer portion of the period both idolatrous and corrupt, and so blind and rebellious at its close, that it had to be scourged out of its territories and chased to the ends of the earth, he retired from his active government of men, leaving them as their sole and sufficient written guide to the end, only the ethical code given them through these same splendid old-time Asiatics. It is well for us that these Asiatics themselves entertained no such idea, and that we are beginning to understand our Christ and his apostles at this point. To be without God in the world, even when one has him in the church, is to live as a pagan, and usually as a pessimist, with no large and worthy hopes. But the new day has dawned.